

Ending Famine in the Horn of Africa: Towards the Policy Agenda

"For almost a century, there has been no excuse for famine..." Alex de Waal.

Since the catastrophic famines in the Greater Horn of Africa in the mid 1980s, this region has been associated in the public mind with recurrent famine. A series of crises since the mid 1980s—while not as widespread or devastating—have continued more or less unabated.

Global attention is currently focused on Southern—not Eastern—Africa, as this region is mostly enjoying good rains and low food prices, although poor rains in Ethiopia and Eritrea are renewing concerns over regional food security. This provides an appropriate opportunity for critical reflection and actions geared to eradicating famine in the Greater Horn Region. This edition of the GHA Food Security Update examines the nature and major causes of famine in the Greater Horn and how our understanding of famine has changed over time then summarizes salient policy issues over the response to and prevention of famine in the region, noting where the policy agenda has yet to be fully developed.

This discussion paper is intended to stimulate debate on the nature of recurring famine in the Horn of Africa, its multiple causes and assist in building regional consensus on the policy agenda required to prevent famine and not just respond to it. It represents the views of the two authors and is not an organizational position paper of either FEWS NET or CARE. We invite reader comment in this critical debate.

Famine in the Greater Horn of Africa

The Greater Horn of Africa—once a food surplus region—has become the locus of repeated food security crises, or outright famines, in recent decades. While the catastrophic famines of Ethiopia and Sudan in the mid 1980s have not been repeated, virtually every year since then has seen a severe food security crisis—albeit more localized—somewhere within the region. In the past four years, famines or major crises have taken place in the Sudan (1998 and throughout), Ethiopia (1999-2000), Kenya (1999-2001), and Eritrea (2000), and more localized crises in Tanzania (1999), Burundi (1999-2001), Uganda (2000-2001) and Somalia (2001-2002). When the FAO publishes its semi-annual list of the 20 most food insecure countries in the world, it is not unusual for every country in the Greater Horn Region to be included.

While there are plenty of reasons for this state of affairs in the Greater Horn, there is no excuse (as de Waal notes). The technical, logistical and financial resources have long existed to eradicate the phenomenon of famine. In other regions of the world significant progress has been made towards eliminating famines and governments have given priority to preparedness capacity and response planning. However, progress elsewhere has not been matched in the Horn and indeed vulnerability is apparently still increasing.

While the efforts of the humanitarian community may alleviate the worst consequences, they are failing to prevent the recurrence of famine, much less eradicate it. Clearly, long-standing questions need to be addressed, and new issues need to be understood better. In short, a new consensus is needed among the wide range of stakeholders engaged in the issue: governments, donors, international organizations and operational agencies, local organizations and local government, researchers, the media—and of course, the communities who face chronic vulnerability to food insecurity and famine.

This issue of the Greater Horn Food Security Update attempts to identify a selected set of priority issues that must be urgently addressed by practitioners, policy makers, researchers, donors, advocacy groups and governments if famine is to be overcome in the Horn of Africa. The time to reflect—and act—on these questions is now, when a longer view can be taken. To wait for the next crisis would be to wait until it is too late.

Issue 1: Towards a Definition of Famine

The international humanitarian community and all its constituent parts require a broadly acceptable definition of what constitutes a ‘famine.’

“Famine” is a word that is highly emotive, and serves as a rallying call to mobilize international action. Everyone can agree on the need for urgent action to eliminate famine, and this in itself offers a powerful platform for change. However, famine is also a difficult word to define with no clear consensus. What makes a famine different from other emergencies or the related concepts of food insecurity and poverty? How would an improved definition be of practical value?

Box 1. Defining “Famine”

Famines are almost always thought of as events that entail widespread malnutrition and starvation, and those that actually suffer famines note that famines have also included economic loss, destitution and social breakdown. A consensus definition of famine needs to consider the issues of:

- **Scope.** This includes both breadth—how many people have to be affected before a “crisis” becomes a “famine,” and depth—how bad does a level of hunger, malnutrition or increased mortality have to be? While famine is clearly hunger on an epidemic scale, there is no commonly accepted distinction between a “crisis” and a “famine”. For example, “emergencies” are often defined by global acute malnutrition in excess of 15% and a crude mortality rate of greater than 1/10,000/day that affects a population or sub-group of a population. “Famine” is broadly understood to denote a worse level of the same indicators, but there is no well defined cut-off.
- **Timing.** If the popularly accepted definition of famine as an event is used, when does a famine event start and end? Answers to this question are linked to the issue of scope or scale.
- **Factors.** Famine may involve many other factors than just access to adequate food. Diseases or exposure—rather than starvation *per se*—may be the major cause of suffering and death. However, hunger and malnutrition are the thread that distinguishes a “famine” from an “epidemic” or other humanitarian crises.

Firstly, many recent food security crises have been accompanied by a public debate about whether they should be classified as famines or not; for example the early stages of the Bahr-el-Ghazal crisis in Sudan in 1998 and Region 5 of Ethiopia in 1999/2000. This had direct consequences on the adequacy of the emergency response. Secondly, the perspectives of humanitarian workers, government officials, the media and those experiencing it can differ greatly. And these differences are important. The definition frames the understanding of the problem and consequently shapes the response. A more rigorous definition helps to better pinpoint the problem and find workable solutions. Thirdly, the ambiguity of the term can be used to advantage by those with responsibility for its prevention to positively evaluate their own effectiveness. A tighter definition will promote a more effective planning-implementation-evaluation-feedback process, which is currently lacking.

In the popular conception, a “famine” is an acute crisis or event involving extraordinary hunger, malnutrition or excess mortality. This definition focuses on the **event**, or the symptoms. This raises perhaps one of the most important points intertwined with the definitional issue. Famine events are part of a longer-term **process** and an underlying chain of causal factors. Famine events are, in effect, the visible tip of an iceberg. While the underlying process and causal

factors often remain hidden from the popular conception of the event, they must be addressed in both mitigating and overcoming famine. Recent attempts to define “famine” include many of the parameters explored in Box1.

The use of the term “famine” in describing a humanitarian crisis has powerful political implications, and thus the term should not be used lightly—but neither should it be avoided because of fear of its political consequences. This underlines the need for a clearly defined—and broadly accepted—term that currently does not exist.

Issue 2: Understanding and Linking Causal Factors and Triggering Factors to Prevention and Response

Famines are complex events: there are many factors underlying the process of famine, and often more than one factor that triggers the event of famine. Some of these are well understood and incorporated into policy and preparedness; others are less well understood.

Our understanding of the ‘causes’ of famine – both the underlying causes and proximate causes or triggers -- is changing and developing over time. This evolving analysis has significant consequences for the policy and response agendas. The classically understood causes of famine revolved around **environmental, climatic and demographic factors**—long-term resource degradation, poor rainfall, land/population pressure, resulting in poor yields, small holding size, a declining rural economy, and a high degree of variance in rural incomes from year to year. Similarly, **conflict and complex political emergencies** are seen a pervasive threat to life and livelihood in the Greater Horn of Africa. Conflict hampers economic growth and investment; it has led to fragmented national politics and it directly destroys people’s livelihoods, assets and institutions—sometimes deliberately, sometimes as a by-product. These factors are well understood. But other factors are less well understood and several need to be urgently highlighted:

Economic Factors, Destitution and Famine Reduction

Poverty is intimately linked to famine. New thinking on destitution and poverty needs to be harnessed to build food security and mitigate famines.

The original work of Amartya Sen highlighted the importance of **economic factors**. These include the purchasing power of households; the assets and strategies on which households rely to give them purchasing power; the market relationships that underpin access to food that is not produced by the household. With increasing market integration these factors have become increasingly important, and explain a lot about the vulnerability of groups like the urban poor, the rural destitute, and HIV/AIDS affected. The consequences of economic shocks are clearly seen in this region, from the massive numbers of destitute in the Ethiopian highlands to the livestock producers and processors impoverished by the ban on livestock imports from Greater Horn countries by the Middle East (See GHA Food Security Updates for February and July 2001).

This suggests that new economic opportunities are urgently required in Africa. Considerable efforts are currently being placed on poverty reduction and trade liberalization. Increased trade has the potential to improve food access for consumers, although the impacts of global liberalization on vulnerable populations are contentious. However, those tasked with preventing famine need to be strongly represented at this discussion to ensure that these programs specifically support and protect the most food insecure populations. It can also be argued that while there has been massive ‘development’ expenditure in the region this has almost always been made without specific linkages to famine alleviation and hence has had little impact on this front.

Governance Policy and Accountability

The primary responsibility for ensuring the right to food in any country rests with the leaders and administration of that country. Therefore, good governance is a necessary precursor to overcoming famine.

While economic factors are at least recognized, much less attention has been paid towards linking famine mitigation directly to **good governance**. Amartya Sen's provocative observation that "famines don't occur in democracies" raised the all-important question of governance and accountability. At root here is the universal human right to adequate food, and the primary responsibilities of states to protect, respect and fulfill that right—including the political institutions that hold leaders accountable. While there are obvious resource constraints to states being able to actually provide food for all citizens, there are clearly areas in which states and other stakeholders directly undermine the right to food for reasons that have nothing to do with an overall lack of resources. While specific famine events may be caused by a combination of factors listed above, the debate about famine has recently shifted to a point where bad governance may be viewed as the major underlying cause of the continuation of famines, and the one that has to be addressed the most urgently. Zimbabwe today is a case in point.

Currently humanitarian relief is often carried out in isolation from the agenda of policy and government reform. The humanitarian imperative offers the justification, with the paramount need to assist affected populations directly. However, this may have resulted in the unintentional transfer of responsibility from national governments to the international humanitarian community. In the worst case this provides governments with the latitude to implement policies that undermine national food security. Therefore, stronger links need to be forged between humanitarian interventions and sound government policy and a clear consensus is needed on the responsibility and accountability of governments to their own citizens.

Other Poorly Understood Factors

The links between **HIV-AIDS** and food security are increasingly appreciated. The HIV-AIDS pandemic in Africa impoverishes families of infected people in both the short and long term. This provides a ripe context for famine, given a specific trigger (the *GHA Food Security Update, April 2001* explores this issue in detail). The current crisis in southern Africa is in part, being directly linked to the HIV-AIDS pandemic in that region. Existing famine responses are centered on addressing these causes. **Urbanization** and urban poverty are increasingly recognized as a worrying factor. Famines are generally considered to be a rural phenomenon. However, a study by Michel Garenne et al retrospectively identified a distinct (albeit mild) urban famine in Antananarivo, Madagascar in 1985-87 that passed unnoticed by the humanitarian community at the time. This illustrates the point that famines are not exclusively rural, and the rural bias of early warning and response systems requires review.

Issue 3: Transfers and Safety Nets

The needs of the highly food-insecure populations still need to be met through a program of transfers and safety nets. The effectiveness of these interventions can, and should, be improved.

There are sections of the population whose needs cannot be met in the short- or medium-term by new economic opportunities, especially in the face of inter-annual variations in income and production. For this group transfers (e.g. food aid) and safety nets remain the only option. Much of the efforts of the aid industry over the last decades have concentrated on improving the efficiency of delivering these services. However, there is still room for considerable improvement. One of these is the urgent requirement to understand the difference between chronic and transitory food insecurity, and to tailor response programs accordingly. In much of the Greater Horn, food aid is being used in the name of emergency response to ameliorate what is essentially chronic food insecurity. It is a no exit strategy for affected populations, government and humanitarian actors. The practical difference between "chronic" and "transitory" mirrors the conceptual difference between "process" and "event:" both have to be understood and acted on.

A second problem is that, even where transitory food insecurity is diagnosed correctly and famine early warning and information systems generally are now much improved, there remain large-scale gaps in the linkage between information and the institutional responses required to prevent disasters. Consequently severe malnutrition and excess mortality often precede major responses to disasters. The humanitarian response system needs to become more flexible and better link early warning information to creative interventions to protect livelihoods.

Social safety nets have been successfully employed in this region and beyond, even though these are costly and difficult to target. Well designed public works schemes may reduce vulnerability to future drought, but more importantly, even if they do not offer a long term solution, they may be an effective holding action until longer-term solutions are found and implemented. However, they are rarely incorporated into food security policy and could be developed more fully in this region, to supplement direct transfers to those who cannot work.

Issue 4: Public Information on Famine

Public opinion has been extremely influential in mobilizing and shaping national and international response to famine. Aid agencies have been adept in utilizing this opportunity to mobilize resources to mitigate famine 'events'. However, the potential role in addressing the underlying causes has been not been effectively utilized.

The mass media have been instrumental in mobilizing international action against famine. However, the presentation of the issues by the media usually focuses on the more newsworthy phenomena of famine 'events'. If a key conception is that we have devoted too much effort towards addressing famines as events rather than as processes, it follows that promoting a public discussion of the underlying causes is central to forming effective policies and governance structures aimed at eliminating famine. In particular the local media (as opposed to the international media) could play a more effective advocacy role.

The ability of the media to house this type of discussion is relatively untested. Part of this problem stems from the related issue of the design of EWS, which largely influence the content of media reports. The current EWS are set up to identify transitory needs, not to monitor these underlying causes and trends. Consequently the debate is poorly informed at all levels with too much focus on responding to famine (events) and not enough on preventing famines (a policy process). There is also room for creating better linkages between EWS and the media, so that the information and analysis that does exist, is more widely disseminated.

Public opinion is extremely influential in the way that emergency responses are designed and implemented. As long as the media continues to focus on famines as news 'events' there is likely to be little pressure for change.

Towards a New Policy Agenda

"Famines" continue to be regular events in the Greater Horn of Africa. Given our current global capacities there should be a consensus that the continuation of this state is unacceptable. However, the existing response mechanisms appear to be more geared towards limiting the occurrence and impact of "famine" events rather than eradicating the problem, which entails addressing the underlying processes. Clearly there is a need for a new, or at least modified, policy agenda.

This new policy agenda needs to be based on a consensus amongst the various stakeholders. This report attempts to provide the first step in this process, by identifying the priority areas where further debate is needed. This is part of a continuing process, working with key partners to define the detailed policy issues. This will be conducted through a series of commissioned papers, internet discussion and a workshop to bring together practitioners, policy makers, researchers, donors, advocacy groups and governments. Broad participation in this process is welcomed, and the conclusions will be reported in further issues of the GHA Food Security Update.

References and Resources

Cuny, Frederick. 1999. *Famine, Conflict and Response. A Basic Guide*. West Hartford: Kumarian Press.

Devereux, Stephen. 1993. *Theories of Famine*. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.

de Waal, Alex. 1989. *Famine That Kills: Darfur, Sudan, 1984-1985*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

de Waal, Alex. 1997. *Famine Crimes*. London: James Currey.

Edkins, Jenny. 2000. *Whose Hunger? Concepts of Famine, Practices of Aid*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Michel Garenne, Dominique Waltisperger, Pierre Cantrelle and Osée Ralijaona, 2002. *Demographic Impact of a Mild Famine in an African City: the Case of Antananarivo: 1985-1987*. Draft paper presented at IDS Conference on Ending Famine, Brighton, February 2002.
(<http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/pvty/Famine/Garenne.pdf>)

Sen, Amartya. 1981. *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Sen, Amartya. 2000. *Development as Freedom*.

Vaux, Tony. 2001. *The Selfish Altruist*.